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On Artificial Rarity and Fakery

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By RICHARD B. WOODWARD

The market for fine-art photography, an estimated annual \$200 million slice of the art business, is bedeviled by a curious paradox. The medium itself tends toward iconic democracy: from one negative hundreds of prints can be made, all identical if need be and, in theory, of equal value. The art market, on the other hand, operates by a much older, aristocratic set of rules: an elite caste of images and objects are elevated above others of their class as collectible art. Only when people believe they are buying rare or one-of-a-kind things will they pay exorbitant prices to own them.

Christie's New York (top), Metropolitan Museum of Art (center), Estate of André Kertesz (bottom)

A print from the work "Noire et Blanche" by Man Ray. Some of Ray's images were faked by a forger exploiting collectors' desires for vintage prints, top. "Truck and Sign," 1930, by Walker Evans, is among the artist's photographs currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum, center. Sold for \$250,000 in 1992: a 1926 vintage print of André Kertesz's "Chez Mondrian," bottom.

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Working around the problem of photography's extraordinary reproductive powers, dealers and auction houses in the mid-1970's devised the concept of "vintage" prints. These were those select few, or perhaps only one print, made by the photographer immediately or soon after the negative. The vague theory was that these earliest interpretations on paper reflected more keenly the "intentions" of the photographer when the shutter was released. Proximity in time of negative to print was key (along with the artist's signature.) Prints of the same image made decades later were deemed inherently less valuable. Even if an artist's printing skills had improved, the first versions supposedly brought the viewer of an image closer to its moment of creation. The revolutionary medium, celebrated by the philosopher Walter Benjamin for having boldly done away with the "aura" of an original, had been transformed into a collectible art, an artificial glow now surrounding these special "vintage" photographs.

The theory lit a fuse under the art market, igniting the photography boom of the late 70's. The concept even made a kind of historical sense. With many 20th-century masters aging or dying, it became clear that supplies of their best work were finite. Experts sifted surviving prints by, say, Edward Weston or Tina Modotti into vintage and nonvintage, and dealers priced them according to comparative rarity and condition.

But during the 90's, the idea of a rarefied class of photographs seemed increasingly contrived and market-driven. The gap in price between vintage

and nonvintage reached absurd proportions for standard images. In 1992, a vintage "Chez Mondrian" from 1926 by André Kertesz sold for \$250,000 while a print from the same negative done in the 70's might bring less than \$2,500. Nonvintage photographs were scorned by dealers in favor of unknown, mundane bodies of work, provided vintage prints were available. As one dealer said recently, "I don't see the point of nonvintage."

Where scarcity had not existed -- as in contemporary photography -- it was created. During the 80's, artists routinely issued limited editions of their prints as a matter of doing business. Even the postmodernist Sherrie Levine, who mocked the reproductive fertility of the medium by rephotographing famous images and signing her own name, strictly controlled her supply. She limited editions of her "fake" Walker Evanses to a single Levine "original."

How problematic the theory has become is further illustrated by two recent scandals involving counterfeit vintage prints by Man Ray and Lewis Hine, and by the Walker Evans retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum, carefully stocked with old prints when newer and, in some cases, finer ones were readily available.

In the case of the Man Ray forgeries, as detailed by Stephen Vincent in the February 1998 issue of Art and Auction magazine, relatively few people were burned. The main victim of the mysterious salesman peddling the forgeries -- a slyboots with the cunning pseudonym Benjamin Walter -- was the German collector Werner Bokelberg, who spent some \$2.35 million on the fakes from 1994 to 1996.

Like any good con artist, Mr. Walter relied on greed. But he also took advantage of the wild speculative fever in the vintage photography market. After Man Ray's death in 1976, the prices of his work rose steadily, climbing into the ether during the 90's. In 1994 a vintage image of his "Noire et Blanche" sold at Christie's for \$354,000. Mr. Walter was offering Mr. Bokelberg a cache of similar Man Ray classics, all proclaimed vintage, for about a third of what the collector would have paid at auction or to a dealer. Mr. Bokelberg was so chastened by the experience -- and the disclosure of being fooled -- that he has decided to stop collecting photography altogether. (The identity of the forger or forgers has not yet been determined, and the case is pending in the French courts.)

The questionable Lewis Hine prints are more widespread and more insidious. An article by Stephen Perloff in the February issue of The Photograph Collector estimated that between 300 and 500 Hines of suspect origins were sold through dealers and auction houses over the last 15 years. The dealers in turn sold these prints in good faith as prime material to their clients, charging as much as \$50,000 apiece, for a financial loss to the dealers that may total many millions of dollars. The case was thought to be so serious that when the Association of International Photography Art Dealers alerted its members last fall, they were told not to speak to the press. "I have a client who was burned and may never buy another vintage photograph," one dealer said.

The suspect prints are even more troubling because their chief source is a member of New York's photography establishment: the 81-year old photographer

Walter Rosenblum, husband of the eminent art historian Naomi Rosenblum. An

assistant to Hine in the 1930's at the Photo League, an organization founded to promote photography's links with social causes, Mr. Rosenblum had gone on to become its president as well as conservator of Hine's archive at his death in 1940. As such, he donated 3,800 Hine negatives and 6,000 prints to the George Eastman House in Rochester in 1955.

No formal charges have been brought against Mr. Rosenblum -- the parties involved hope to settle the case out of court and thus were unwilling to discuss the matter on the record -- but it is agreed that, unwittingly or not, for two decades he sold several hundred prints of dubious authenticity. Not all of the prints were advertised as vintage, but all were signed and sold by dealers to clients as Hine originals.

One of the ironies is that in both these cases the supposed fakes were richer in tone and texture than the originals. The trumperies by Mr. Walter (or whoever did them) were so alluring that Maria Morris Hambourg, photography curator at the Metropolitan Museum, was ready to make them the cornerstone of a Man Ray retrospective until she noticed a suspicious trademark on the photographic paper. She expressed her doubts to Mr. Bokelberg, who found out too late that he had been duped.

Most of Hine's surviving prints from the early decades of the century are beat up and flat in tonal scale. He was not producing fine art but instead hoping to improve social conditions. His photographic exposés of children in factories were instrumental in passing child labor laws. Several dealers stayed away from Mr. Rosenblum's offerings for just this reason, believing the prints to be too beautiful to be true -- which, of course, they were.

The vintage prints in the Walker Evans retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum are not fakes, so far as anyone knows. But they are not outstanding examples of printmaking, either. Evans was never known for his wizardry in the darkroom. "He probably never owned a decent washer in his life," said John Szarkowski, director emeritus at the Museum of Modern Art and organizer of the museum's retrospective for Evans in 1971.

In that earlier show only a handful of the 202 prints were vintage. "The idea was not as prevalent as a religious superstition as it is now," Mr. Szarkowski said. Virtually everything was printed anew by young craftsmen at the museum. Mr. Szarkowski edited the negatives and presented the final results to Evans, who would often exclaim that he himself had never done so good a job of pulling out details and separating tones.

In other words, the theory that vintage photographs somehow more closely reflect an artist's intentions should be viewed more than a little skeptically. Evans was delighted to exhibit nonvintage prints at his retrospective, even ones he had not developed himself. "A lot of those old prints were just no good," Mr. Szarkowski said.

Older photographers like Evans and Berenice Abbott, who lived through the beginnings of the vintage fetish, ridiculed the notion that their first versions of an image were in any way superior. "Abbott used to laugh when she would discover one of her old wilted brown photographs in the back of a drawer," said Denise Bethel, who runs the photography department at Sotheby's. "She couldn't understand why people didn't recognize she had become a better printer."

The Met retrospective, organized after the vintage cult had taken over

photography, is a complete reversal of the Modern's show; only a few prints are nonvintage. The Met's is far more inclusive, bringing in more of the work Evans did early and late in life. The essays in the catalog measurably increase our knowledge of Evans's character and methodology as an artist. But it is worth asking if the six years of effort by the associate curator Jeff Rosenheim to hunt down decent older prints were really well spent. Once the decision had been made to base the show on vintage Evans, it was hard to include newer, often colder and sharper prints without, in Mr. Rosenheim's words, "creating tension on the wall."

There is a saying on Wall Street that the market is never wrong. If the art business has decided that earlier versions of classic images are far more valuable than later ones, so be it. Art institutions, however, should be able and willing to buck that trend. "The art market sells rare objects," Mr. Szarkowski said. "But curators at museums shouldn't have to bend to those demands. All things being equal, I would show an older print. I wouldn't hesitate, though, to show a new one if I thought it was better."

The debate, as Mr. Rosenheim points out, "is really temporal; in time these distinctions between vintage and nonvintage Evans will erode." For the work of many artists this has already happened. Nonvintage prints by Paul Strand, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus, considered relatively worthless in the late 1970's, were bringing tens of thousands of dollars by the late 1990's.

The hunger for primal impressions by these master artists, however, would seem to invite more con artists like Benjamin Walter. Other sectors of the print market distinguish, say, the states of an etching or engraving and price them accordingly. There can be genuine differences in quality between photographs made by an artist at various stages of life. But the huge price gaps that now exist between vintage and nonvintage for classic images -- 100 times higher in some cases -- make it tempting for a counterfeiter to exploit the gullible and the greedy.

It isn't that hard to fake a photograph. With access to the negative and some historically correct paper, a good printer can make up a batch of competent forgeries and add a signature. The contemporary market is especially vulnerable. With so many younger artists using photography but so few of them printing their own work, a rash of fakes by underpaid darkroom technicians would seem to be a natural result of the present art scene if prices continue to rise. As Ms. Bethel said, "Actually, it's surprising it hasn't happened more often."

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